

# Surface Archaeology

*Eugenio Aguirre*

**I**  
“It sounds exciting!” Laura said, her face shining happily, an attitude she adopted whenever something interested her. “And how do you do it?”

“It’s very simple,” I answered not really looking at her. The ties on my huaraches were wrapped around my ankles and required all my attention. “I pick out a fairly large area, preferably near a mound that seems to be a pyramid or burial site, and slowly walk around among the furrows made by the farmers. There I usually find ceramic pebbles, pieces of obsidian and, if I’m very lucky, a small face or a leg or hand or part of a torso. Very rarely, a complete figure.”

“And why do you want them?” the girl asked in her lilting voice. “Well, I’m not an archaeologist, a scientist, you know, but I admire pre-Columbian cultures. I’m very much interested in them. I know something about the styles of the classical period and the preclassical... the decline, and even the methods used by the natives, their work in tablets, bas-relief, their use of beads and other jewelry. I find in them a special language that tells me about their past grandeur, the flourishing of their arts. The truth is, Laura, I collect them and keep them in these cookie tins. Of course, at times I look at them, examine them, show them to my friends!”

“Fabulous!” Laura cried with a touch of mockery that made me flush. “I hope they amuse you a lot.”

“So you won’t come? I assure you it’s...” Her sarcastic smile cut me off. In the crow’s feet around her beautiful eyes there was an all too clear message which said “stupid.” I changed position and began whistling a well known folk song. “And tonight?” I asked.

“You’re not going to try to take me out into the fields to see if you can find one of your little figures?”

“To the fields? You’re crazy! I’m talking about another kind of surface research.”

“Oh, I get it! Well, that sounds more entertaining, more exciting. But be careful about trying to collect any of my little pieces because I’ll pull off you know what.”

“Don’t worry, I’ll be tender.”

The blazing Sunday sun found me walking in a bog that sank under my feet after nightlong rain. My back was burning. I had spent three hours searching and only a dozen pieces of various kinds of ceramic had found their way into my knapsack. Some with borders in high relief, some smooth and some polychromed. My footsteps covered more than an acre of land carefully prepared for seeding. It would be done the next week the farmer had told me as he urged on his yoke of oxen.

Laura had stayed at the hotel to play tennis with Señora Esparza. Her hands would be clean, at most dampened by the natural sweat of her palms. Mine, on the other hand, were filthy black, the nails made unrecognizable by bits of accumulated mud. They had worked hard to find something good... but nothing.

It must have been two in the afternoon when I seemed at last to have found something exciting: a complete hand, intact but for the plow’s mutilation of the wrist.

With great care I removed accumulated mud, looking, always looking for the body it belonged to. But it was alone and there were no indications or fragments to suggest the presence of other parts. I blew off the dry dust covering it and tugged at it hard.

**II**  
“I had to pull with all my might, father. The piece resisted me with great force. It seemed to be a fight for survival. As I grabbed it, I closed my fingers the way you showed me and locked my thumb and forefinger together. Then the battle started. He was pulling from above and I, from below. Until I managed to get his head in the furrow and then everything was much easier. Look, it really is a very curious piece.”

“That is interesting, Citlacoatl. Those who devote themselves to following the movement of the stars through the pathways of heaven, those who practice *ilhucatl*, have told me they are much interested in the kind of archaeology you practice. Although, when they realize you keep all your pieces in red clay amphoras and store them in the back of the palace, they shake their heads in disapproval.”

“Why, father? If they’re only good for entertaining your friends and as an excuse to take beautiful women to the countryside and...” ❧